

Sentence-Level Revision

Once the basic elements of your paper are in place (thesis/focus, organization, and development), you're ready to begin sentence-level revision. To revise effectively, you need to read each sentence carefully, looking for problems or errors in punctuation, spelling, wording, grammar, etc. In other words, you cannot simply skim over the sentences--you need to read them critically. The best way to do this is to read your paper aloud. You can read the paper to yourself, but it's also effective to read your paper to other people. They often catch errors you might miss simply because they are not as "close" to the paper as you are.

What should you look for when you read your paper, and what should other people listen for while you are reading? The following guidelines should help you spot common errors.

1. Their/there/they're

Their is used to show possession—to show that something belongs to a group of people or things. *Examples: Their* car was stolen last night. The trees are losing *their* leaves.

There is used in two ways. First, it can be used at the beginning of a sentence before a verb. *Example: There* were more than 1,500 people at the conference. Second, it can be used to answer the question "where?" *Examples: More* than 1,500 people were *there*. I put the groceries over *there*.

They're is a contraction of "they are." If you can substitute "they are" in the sentence and it still sounds correct, you've chosen the right word. *Example: They're* leaving at 7:00 tonight.

2. Your/You're

Your is used to show possession—to show that something belongs to one person or to a group of people. *Examples: Your* book is on the desk. The teacher told the students, "I will hand back *your* tests tomorrow."

You're is a contraction of "you are." If you can substitute "you are" in the sentence and it still sounds correct, you've used the correct word. *Example: You're* still planning to attend the concert tonight, aren't you?

Note: You probably won't use *your/you're* very often in formal college-level writing.

3. Its/it's

Its is used to show possession—to show that one thing belongs to another. *Example: The* dog wagged *its* tail.

It's is a contraction of "it is." *It's* does *not* show possession! If you can substitute "it is" in the sentence and it still sounds correct, you've chosen the right word. *Example: It's* almost time for my favorite TV show.

4. Then/than

Then is used to indicate time. It answers the question “when?” *Example:* First I have to go to class, and *then* I have to finish my paper.

Than is used to make a comparison. *Examples:* I would rather watch the Super Bowl *than* the NBA playoffs. Helen is taller *than* Mary is.

5. Too/two/to

Too means “very” or “also.” If you can substitute one of these two words in the sentence and it still sounds correct, you’ve chosen the right word. *Examples:* The price of those shoes is *too* high. I thought the shoes were expensive *too*.

Two is a number. *Example:* The farm is *two* miles from town.

To is used in all other situations. *Examples:* Send the bill *to* me when you’re finished. I wanted *to* go, but I was sick.

6. Whose/Who’s

Whose is used to show possession—to show that something belongs to someone. *Example:* *Whose* dog damaged my fence?

Who’s is a contraction of “who is.” If you can substitute “who is” in the sentence and it still sounds correct, you’ve chosen the right word. *Example:* *Who’s* going to the party tonight?

7. Use to/Used to

Use to indicates that something is being used in the present or will be used in the future. *Examples:* This is the word processing program I *use to* type my papers. This is the program I *will use to* type my papers next semester.

Used to can have two meanings. First, it indicates that something was used/done in the past. *Examples:* Many years ago, wood-burning stoves were *used to* heat pioneer homes. We *used to* shop there regularly, but we stopped. Second, *used to* can mean “familiar with something” or “accustomed to something.” *Example:* I got *used to* the cold weather quickly.

8. Would of/could of/should of—These are incorrect and should be changed to *would have*, *could have*, and *should have*.

9. Semicolons—A semicolon is used to join *two complete sentences that are related to each other*. Semicolons give your sentences variety. If you’re unsure whether or not you’ve used a semicolon correctly, ask yourself if the information on the *left side* of the semicolon is a complete sentence. Then ask yourself if the information on the *right side* of the semicolon is a complete sentence. If the answer to both of these questions is “yes” and the two sentences are related to each other, you have used the semicolon correctly. *Example:* The test seemed easy; I’m sure I passed it.

10. Fragments—A fragment is an incomplete sentence. Many times a fragment can be “fixed” by combining it with the sentence before or after it, but sometimes you will need to rewrite the sentence to eliminate the fragment.

Examples: Because I was very sick. (fragment) I went to the doctor. (sentence)
Because I was very sick, I went to the doctor. (sentence)
Running to catch the bus. (fragment) I tripped and fell. (sentence)
Running to catch the bus, I tripped and fell. (sentence)
Although the necklace was very important to me. (fragment)
However, the necklace was very important to me. (sentence)

- 11. Run-on Sentences**—A run-on sentence occurs when two sentences are “jammed together” without any punctuation. It can be “fixed” in three different ways. First, you can insert a period between the two sentences. Second, you can insert a comma and the word *or*, *and*, or *but*. Third, you can insert a semi-colon if the two sentences are related to each other.

Examples: We learned many new concepts some were hard to understand. (run-on)
We learned many new concepts. Some were hard to understand.
We learned many new concepts, but some were hard to understand.
We learned many new concepts; some were hard to understand.

- 12. Comma Splices**—A comma splice occurs when two sentences are joined with a comma. A comma can’t be used in this way unless it is followed by *or*, *and*, or *but*.

You can “fix” a comma splice in the same three ways a run-on sentence can be fixed.

Examples: I wanted to go skiing, my sister wanted to go skydiving. (comma splice)
I wanted to go skiing. My sister wanted to go skydiving.
I wanted to go skiing, but my sister wanted to go skydiving.
I wanted to go skiing; my sister wanted to go skydiving.

- 13. Awkward/Unclear Sentences**—Sometimes you can fix an awkward or unclear sentence by breaking it into two sentences or combining it with another sentence. However, in certain situations this won’t work. If you’re struggling with an awkward or unclear sentence, take a break for a few minutes. This will help you look at the sentence more objectively and will also relieve your frustration. When you return to your paper, read the sentence aloud. Then ask yourself *exactly* what you’re trying to say in that sentence. Think about this for a short time. When you’re sure of what you want to say, answer your question aloud as clearly and concisely as possible. Then write down your answer. If you’re working with someone, have that person write for you. Finally, ask yourself if your answer makes sense and is worded clearly. If not, make any necessary adjustments—at this point, these should be fairly minor.

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